

# Donut

*Adm. Education*

## Content Standard 1: Foundations

The first class I took in my Master's Program was Sped 551 Urban Multicultural Special Education with Dr. Patricia Landurand-Mederios. She was also my supervisor during my student teaching, so I was very pleased to have the opportunity to take a class with her. I can say without hesitation that she was an inspiration to me, and it was her encouragement for me to become an "agent of change" in the field of special education that led me in the direction of becoming a special education administrator.

Her method of teaching included using many personal stories of how she was able to implement change. Hearing first-hand from her how the field evolved and changed during her tenure laid a strong foundation for me. She made a commitment to teaching English Language Learners (ELLs) before anyone else was doing so. Through her research on best practice, she developed a strong belief in how necessary it is to approach the whole student, taking their cultural background into account. By doing so, you are looking at each student as an individual, which is the foundation of special education.

Much of what I learned in my Master's Program built upon the strong base my undergraduate studies provided. Once you have prior knowledge on a topic, it is much easier to develop true knowledge. The greatest thing I have developed over the last three years is a feeling of confidence in myself, and my own foundation of knowledge in the field. I began my program after only one year of teaching, so I still had much to learn in and out of the classroom. The classes I took in the Urban Multicultural Program (Sped 551, 552 and 553) taught me the evidenced-based principles and theories of teaching students who are ELL. In particular, I learned the theories from Dr. Hui.

As an administrator, it is important that I know what programs will be most successful. I now know that the most successful approach is that of a bilingual program where a student's first language is used to help teach the second language. Too often these programs are cut or not offered at all. Dr. Landurand covered the human issues that have historically influenced the field. I learned the history of special education beginning with students in institutions, then the movement to include students in their home schools during the 1970s, which inspired the first law for students with handicaps. It is interesting how terms change, and we no longer use the word handicap. The law today is Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Americans with Disabilities Act. While these laws were introduced during my undergraduate studies, my graduate program delved deeper into the programs that came out of these laws, looking at particular cases, and hearing how other professionals throughout the state have had to deal with legal issues.

Through Sped 534, Parents & Family of a Child with Disabilities taught by Amy Grattan, I have learned the relationships of organizations of special education to the organizations and functions of schools, school systems, and other agencies. We just had Theresa Curran from West Bay Collaborative speak to the class. I learned about the Transition Academy for the first time, and was encouraged to attend their open house just this Thursday. It is important to know that students have this type of option for learning the transition skills they will need to lead productive lives.

My own experience has been limited in the field of early childhood special education, and I learned a great deal about what is available to students beginning at the age of three. I was not familiar with early intervention services, or CEDAR, which is an umbrella service for families.

## 2. Development and Characteristics of Learners

My Multicultural series (Sped 551, 552, and 553) most certainly taught me how to demonstrate respect for students first as unique human beings. One of the most important things I learned was that it is ok to talk about our differences. That it is the right thing to do. I was always hesitant and a bit uncomfortable with people who were different from me. Dr. Landurand in particular pushed me to be more open. I learned how important it is as an administrator to make families feel welcome which means you will have notices in their languages, pictures up of people from many different backgrounds, and activities where those from different cultures will feel comfortable attending.

In Sped 534, Ms. Grattan began the course with an activity that had us put in order our priorities as parents from a list of chores that needed to be accomplished. She had us pretend to be a working parent of two special needs children. It was very interesting to see how each of the students in the class prioritized the activities. This shed insight into understanding how the experiences of individuals with ELN can impact families. That is the greatest thing I have learned in her class - How you look at families. Each is in their own life cycle stage, and the more you can learn about the whole family, the better you will be able to serve the student.

I now understand how exceptional conditions can interact with a student's ability to learn to read. I did not have any class that focused on teaching reading. I would suggest that one be included in the undergraduate requirements, because so much depends on a student's ability to read. Sped 518 taught me how important it is to know and use comprehension strategies for the diverse learners in your classroom. I had never given a fluency test, and having to perform one as a requirement, forced me to work with one of my juniors, and it opened my eyes to how going back to the basics for even students at this age is important if that is where their ability lies. I used the Words Their Way program for the first time, and ever since have been using this wonderful resource in my classroom teaching.

## 3. Individual Learning Differences

All of my classes focused on the effects that an exceptional condition can have on an individual's learning in school and throughout life. The Multicultural series (Sped 551, 552 and 553) made it extremely clear that it is a disservice to a student who is an English language learner to be classified as special needs if that is not truly the case. If a student is placed in special education classrooms, it might actually hinder their learning if they have the ability to function in the general education curriculum with supports. Too often, teachers see a language deficit as a learning disability. Dr. Hui taught me how to use a protocol to differentiate between a language need and a special education need. Dr. Landurand taught me that in some cultures, students will not look you in the eye, for others if you look them in the eye, you are signaling a fight. You must take culture into account as you work with students with exceptional needs in order to be the best teacher possible.

I work in a high school, and a large focus is on transition. My multicultural classes helped me to think about a families background while transition planning. It would be a disservice to students not to take the time to learn about cultures and what is and is not acceptable to the family. For instance, I learned in the Native American culture, the elders play a significant role. A special educator should make certain that parents and guardians know that they have the right to invite the grandmother to the IEP meetings, and that as part of the family their input is very welcomed. It was reinforced to me how important it is to take everyone's feelings into account, before ultimately basing decisions on what is best for the student and what the student wants.

In Sped 503, Positive Behavior Interventions, Dr. Imber taught me how important it is to get to know your students. This is done through observation and by using data. Quite often we overlook important information that is available to us such as classroom assignments and homework. By reviewing the daily work of students, teachers get to know the student as an individual. Do they perform much better during the morning hours? Is every Monday a bad because the child got to bed late? These individualized facts give you the data needed to individualize instruction. Too often, special educators generalize according to disability, when, in fact, there may be others factors that can be taken into account. When this is done, some problems may go away, especially where behavior is concerned. Often a student's behavior will stand in the way of their learning, so if instruction is to be challenging, the student must be engaged and participating properly.

#### 4. Instructional Strategies

My knowledge of evidence-based instructional strategies to individualize instruction has grown exponentially throughout this program. Sped 518, Reading Instruction, was a critical eye opener for me. It improved my work with the Reading Specialist and the Literacy Coach. I became an equal to them with the knowledge Dawn August imparted. She is a true professional dedicated to her field and she taught comprehension strategies that worked by having students actually perform them and demonstrate them in class. Learning is acquired by doing, and Ms. August spent a portion of every class having us work hands-on to gain experience in instructional strategies. I know this is one of the areas I grew the most in as a special educator because I can now assist much more actively in reading instruction.

In Sped 553, Content Based ESL Instruction, Professor Lori Fontana taught me how to teach both content and English at the same time. I was introduced to the SIOP method of planning. When one takes the time to think about what learning strategies they will be using in every lesson, you work as a teacher will improve. Ms. Fontana is a practicing professional who brought real life experience to the classroom. I believe this type of instruction is the most valuable. We planned a unit in her class that had us focusing on three content areas. She showed me how it was possible to teach the same content, while you were individualizing instruction according to needs, especially those of the English language learner. So much of what she presented was practical information that would help all students. This was the first class where I worked with the WIDA standards. All of education focuses on what the WIDA standards to, which is reading, writing, listening and comprehension. When forced to consider these standards for the first time in lesson planning, I believe my lessons improved greatly. Many students are

not classified as being ESL, but they could certainly benefit by this approach to teaching. This includes paying particular attention to vocabulary words used in the content area, being direct and not using too many words when presenting new information.

In LEAD 504, one of the greatest things I have learned that has really stayed with me is that when planning units, the performance skills are extremely important, and should not just be looked at as an extra or the fun part of a lesson. If a teacher is doing an activity, there should be a direct connection to the objectives of the lesson and what you want the student to be able to take away from the lesson and generalize in other areas. Too often, projects are done that have no real learning impact. This just occurred in a 10<sup>th</sup> grade science class where students spent two weeks creating houses for a "disaster day." While it was a fun hands-on experience, I can see no way two weeks of instruction (in an 80 block class) could be justified. Special needs students are generally behind, and time is of the essence. I plan units now and the performance skills are standard based applied learning skills students need to have as an outcome of the lesson. Dr. Garcia was an excellent teacher in this regard.

#### 5. Learning Environments and Social Interactions

Dr. Landurand paid deep attention to how important it is to actively create learning environments for individuals with ELN that foster cultural understanding, safety and emotional well-being, positive social interactions, and active engagement. I now know that this is done by putting up pictures of people from different cultures, having your lessons reflect people from other cultures and putting up students work in this area. Her passion for the subject instilled this in me, and one of the first things I do in my room is make it pleasant for students. This means plenty of space for the student who is using a wheel chair and a quiet spot for the student who is easily distracted. I greet students at the door, always try to smile and greet a student by name. Many students with ELN have low self esteem, and teacher's social interactions have an impact on learning. I think every one of my professors modeled how social interactions should be employed. Even Dr. Imber's bad jokes showed students that he cares about them by breaking tensions when discussing sensitive topics.

One of the things I am most proud of in my work as a special educator is how the special needs students have been integrated into the regular environment. I collaborate with my general education colleagues every day to make certain the all students are making progress. The growth of students who have come from self contained classrooms has been tremendous and especially rewarding. I have learned not to sell a student short, or to have lower expectations for them. It is sometimes hard to get the general educators to accept some of the needier children in their classes, but through my training, I am able to offer strategies that work. It is one of the more demanding aspects of the job to continually help others to see that special needs students belong in the regular classroom and will prosper with the right assistance. It is important to provide guidance and direction to paraeducators and others, such as classroom volunteers and tutors, because they likely have no education in special education at all. My administration classes have helped teach me to work with others in a manner that gets them to do what you want without coming across as bossy. This includes framing things appropriately, focusing on what is best for the student. If you always do what you think is best for the student, then even if you make a mistake, it will be an honest one that can be corrected. One of the greatest things I have learned is to

listen to both sides of a story. I was quick to jump in with decisions, but through experience and training, I now know that you should not rush to judgment, listen to all sides, and try to find a middle ground that is acceptable to all.

## 6. Language

One again, I will reiterate how much I learned from Dawn August. She runs one of the best literacy programs in the state, and her hands-on knowledge, real life situations, and ability to convey knowledge through her through planning was exceptional. She taught many individualized strategies to enhance language development and teach communication skills to individuals with ELN. While there is certainly students who have every need imaginable, in practice, the need you see the most is that to improve reading ability. Reading and writing go hand in hand, so by improving fluency, vocabulary and comprehension, you will most certainly improve all areas of communication.

Dr. Hui covered the theory of language development in Sped 553, Dual Language Development. I had not studied all of the basics in the depth that she did. I refer to phonology, morphology and syntax. I learned communication strategies and resources to facilitate understanding of subject matter for individuals with ELN whose primary language is not English throughout the multicultural series. I feel fortunate to have been able to take these classes because I really did have a deficit in this area. I have lived in Lincoln most of my life, and have been surrounded by mostly white, middle class people. I needed to have this experience to become a better practitioner in a state where so many of the students live in an urban area. I believe these classes have made me a much more well rounded professional, and I feel more confident in my work with underprivileged students from different cultural backgrounds.

## 7. Instructional Planning

Several of my classes required that a unit plan be developed. In Sped 553, Content Based ESL Instruction, I learned how to incorporate specific learning strategies into individual lesson plans. Skills such as note taking cannot be assumed. Teachers need to model good note taking and build it into their plans or it may get overlooked. This class in particular focused on taking into consideration a student's cultural and linguistic factors.

In LEAD 504, Leading, Learning I, Planning, Instruction & Assessment we had to take a unit that we had previously taught, and redo it using the backwards design approach. I cannot tell you how much I learned through this process. By focusing on what you want the outcome to be, on what students will be able to demonstrate at the end of your lessons, your planning is much more targeted to specific objectives. The core of special education is meeting goals and objectives. I learned how to carefully select shorter-range goals and objectives while taking into consideration and individual's abilities and needs and the learning environment. I now plan lessons in this fashion, and it has helped me to focus in on the standards and GSEs. I feel our test scores have improved because of this method of teaching and would suggest that it become part of the RIC standard lesson template.

Another area I learned a great deal throughout the program was technology. As a person in my forties, I must admit that I had a larger learning curve than the younger students. I was not always comfortable with the computer, but with each class and the requirements to perform on the computer, I became more proficient. Dr. Imber in particular insisted that students be proficient in excel, chart making and PowerPoint. I can now say that I use PowerPoint quite well, and implement many lessons in this format because it is so easy and efficient to use.

For individualized instruction, I have a student who uses a Franklin Speller, several who use tape recorders, and about ten who have been issued school laptops to help with organization and communication skills.

One area I feel I am still growing in is the ability to make instructional plans that are modified based on ongoing analysis of the individual's learning progress. In Sped 518, I learned all about the Personal Literacy Plan. We looked at the law and how a good one would be written. I get a copy of each of my student's PLP, and I have taken skills I have learned in Sped 518 and tried to write goals and objectives similar to those in the PLP. Ongoing analysis needed to be done about every six to eight weeks, and I struggle with staying up. I can definitely see the benefit to making modifications based on progress, so I hope to continue to develop in this area. I have also learned a great deal about Response to Intervention. Again, I struggle with keeping up with the data. I embrace its use, and see the value that can be had in instructional planning. Finding the time to implement and assess is the problem. I have learned many strategies that I have tried and seen work. Again, while I struggle in this area, I do have a confidence that I am doing good work, and I continually strive to be a life-long learner who keeps trying new things to improve my work.

## 8. Assessment

In my undergraduate work, I took a class on assessment that focused on the traditional types of testing used in special education such as the Woodcock Johnson, TOWL and other standardized tests. When I began my graduate work, I felt comfortable using these assessments and relied on the data produced to see where a student's grade level was, what their reading level was, and other information provided by those types of tests. Not much had been mentioned about the importance of formative assessment. This is another area where I learned a great deal from the program, especially in LEAD 504. My mind was opened up to the use of multiple types of assessment information that was available to me when I am making educational decisions. I now know how extremely important it is to use formative assessments frequently during a class period, especially in inclusion classes. A simple use of small white boards where students write answers to a question and every one holds up their answer. A brief glance, you can tell who is getting the concept and who isn't. This is the type of assessment that should drive instruction. I had been focused on summative assessment, which is also important in today's world of standards. I had the opportunity to sit on the Bias Review Committee for the NECAP test. I had not realized how to look for bias until I was encouraged to attend this committee by Dr. Garcia, and then think about bias in my own school and how simple questions could hold some students at a disadvantage. Once again, I will reiterate that my Master's program helped me to deepen knowledge gained in my undergraduate classes. Certainly I was taught about eligibility for special education

services, but as a practicing professional in the field for a few years, I came to realize how very wrong it was to base decisions on test numbers alone. Professionals need to use non-biased, meaningful assessments for decision making, so that students are not misplaced in a too restrictive an environment.

Dr. Page had a focus on technology in his LEAD 505 class. It was through his encouragement, that I looked deeper into some of the accommodations that technology could offer special needs students. One area that I had not been familiar with was how you can individualize instruction through well planned web quests. Teachers can individualize instruction according to reading level and ability, while not stigmatizing a student. The opening pages all look alike, the content is similar, but the playing field can be leveled with technology. The font can be bigger, words can be highlighted, and reading levels adjusted. Throughout my training, I have been encouraged to think outside the box. As a professional at a higher level, more is expected in the way you think about traditional education topics such as assessment.

My EDU 501 Fundamentals of Research class taught me about measurement theory and best practice. This was a new area for me, and there was a good deal of math required in looking at measurement theory. However, it is important for professionals to stay current with the most recent data, and to be able to determine if it is legitimate. Special educators need to know the appropriate use and limitations of various types of assessments. By being familiar with research practices, I know how to research the limits of a test and determine its reliability.

## 9. Professional and Ethical Practice

I took two of my courses at Providence College. One was in the fundamentals of Research and the other was Organization and Administration of Special Education with Dr. Thomas DiPaola. I felt very fortunate to have him as a professor since he had just stepped down from his position at RIDE as the Director of Special Education for the State. He gave first-hand experiences in ethical and professional practice. His experience in legal matters was immense. A particular area that I knew nothing about was how important busing is to special needs students. I had never had any dealing with this area, but I now know that as an administrator, it will behoove me to be on top of transportation issues. Students should not be on a bus for more than one hour each way, they may require air conditioning or a lift. If they need it, a district must provide it. Districts must provide transportation to out of district placements. These issues bring up budget issues which sometimes blur the ethical side of our practice where doing what is necessary by law is not necessarily doing the right thing ethically. Dr. DiPaola showed me information available online that I was not aware of, and instructed students to pay attention to Rhode Island as a state, instead of just thinking about your own individual school. As an administrator, professional practice will include national issues also. Dr. DiPaola also reviewed national policies and data that I had never seen before. Working at a charter school, I have a particular interest in this

movement, and he allowed me to focus some of my work in this area thereby expanding my knowledge in non-traditional options for students.

Dr. Page introduced me to Professional Learning Communities in LEAD 505. We spent nearly three weeks reading about best practice and discussing what the schools in the state are doing in this area. The main idea I walked away with was “what do we do with the kid who is not learning?” That is the crux of special education, and it was so refreshing to be in a class that was preparing principals along-side special education administrators. There has been a shift in education, and it is now the responsibility of everyone to make sure that each student is learning. In a professional Learning community, teachers meet often to discuss what is going on in their classrooms and how they might be able to improve their practice. The concept of how Response to Intervention plays into answering the question of what we do with the kid who was not learning was introduced. I feel like I was being challenged as a professional to help move these practices forward. Special Educators are the experts called in to help general educators develop strategies for dealing with students in their classroom before special education services are required. Dr. Page helped me to realize that by using current evidence-based best practices, I could stay ahead of the curve. He encouraged use of the data that is available to all teachers, not just the traditional testing we are used to in special education.

In LEAD 504, we looked at best practice as being able to develop instructional units by using the backwards design process. Again, this was new to me and I walked away with the question “what do we want the student to be able to do at the end of this unit?” Answering that question should be the starting point. Once we know that, then we take into account what strategies we will use and how we will incorporate the many aspects of diversity that the individuals in our classes have.

## 10. Collaboration

I believe that collaboration is the backbone of special education. I have learned throughout my Master’s Program that you must be professional when working with others. With families, Sped 534 taught me to consider the family’s life cycle, meaning do they have a young child at home, an elementary student or an adolescent? Each stage brings its own issues. How is the family dealing with the impact of having a special needs student? Have they accepted the realities they will face? A special educator will take the families perspective into account, and make them feel like equals in the process. It was just recently I learned that in almost all of the standards and laws, the family is actually listed before other educators, such as this standard reads: Special educators routinely and effectively collaborate with families, other educators, related service providers, and personnel from community agencies in culturally responsive ways. In my work with general educators, they sometimes become frustrated at how involved some parents are in their students learning. They actually see this as a negative. Just last week one of my parents wanted to make an appointment with an English teacher. The teacher called me up and said that she had just met with this parent last week and didn’t see the need to meet with her again! In this instance, my training was very helpful. I reminded the teacher that parents are an important part of the process, and that we are lucky that mom is so involved. To me, the mother is truly a partner in the education process. I am continuing to work with the English teacher so that she has the same perspective.



Dr. Imber's class taught me how important it is to collaborate with the general educators because they are the ones seeing the student's behaviors, and they will be the ones who can lend insight into what is the function of the behavior and what replacement might be just as effective. While collaborating, it is important to frame things in the way you would like them to come to fruition. I learned that from Dr. Page in LEAD 505. How things are presented is just as important as what you are saying. I was a bit skeptical, because I am a very straight forward person who doesn't like to play mind games with people. However, Dr. Page did have good evidence from successful managers how important framing questions is in getting the results you want. I tend to be a person who tells people what to do. That is not good collaboration. It is important to get buy-in from others, if you want them to do what you want. As my experiences have grown, I have seen this first-hand. As an administrator, I will try to let everyone share their ideas before I set my own. By doing so, I will assure that the needs of individuals with ELN are addressed throughout their schooling.